

**Conservation and Development Appropriations Subcommittee  
Public Hearing February 20, 2013**

Dear Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the funding levels for the State Parks and Forest System proposed in the Governor's FY 2014-15 Budget.

My name is Eileen Grant. I am the President of the Friends of CT. State Parks, a coalition of 22 individual statewide Friends groups with overall membership of 6100 members, all of whom are volunteers. We provide monetary assistance, sponsor educational programming, advocate for increased resources and contribute over 75,000 volunteer hours annually to enhance visitor experience in our parks. These donated hours are valued at \$2 million per annum. In addition, Friends groups, since their inceptions, have given an additional \$8+ million in cash and goods to improve conditions in our severely underfunded System.

Despite decades of Friends' substantive efforts, the state of state parks only grows worse yearly. Unfortunately, the State has not realistically supported its facilities for 30 years and continues not to make the investments necessary to keep parks, a critical tourism network, well-maintained, safe and open for the families of Connecticut.

The most critical problem for the State Parks Division is its minimal number of full time field positions. At present, only 74 field staff members (16 park supervisors and 58 maintainers) are available to manage and maintain 107 parks and service the needs of 8 million annual visitors. This year, 15 of these 74 workers will be eligible to retire, conceivably bringing staff strength to 59 in the next fiscal cycle. Forty years ago, when park lands were half their present acreage and park visitors were far fewer, park field staff numbered 185!

The ratio of full time field employee to visitor is already one worker per 108,000 patrons. With the looming retirements, that ratio will become 1 worker per 135,000 visitors. This level of coverage would never be tolerated in the private sector. By means of comparison to another

Connecticut tourism network member- Mystic Seaport employs 195 full-time and 95 part time employees (plus a separate seasonal work crew). Mystic Seaport hosts just 300,000 visitors to parks' 8 million.

In the proposed FY 2014-15 Budget, once again, no full time park positions will receive funding to be refilled. Death by attrition is the Park System's undeserved fate if this de-escalation in work force strength continues unchecked.

In addition to no full time positions refilled in the budget, money to hire desperately needed seasonal workers will be reduced. 85% of park work is done by seasonals who are already far few in number to take care of baseline responsibilities. Any further diminishment of their ranks will cripple the System and force the closure of many parks.

The State Parks System contributes \$1 billion and 9000 jobs annually to Connecticut's economy. For every dollar invested in parks, \$38 is returned to state coffers. An entity so obviously beneficial to the State financially needs to be reinforced, not weakened. If parks are to retain future value to local and regional economies, and bolster the state tourism network, they must be properly staffed and sustained. The relative condition of park properties directly affects those who surround our facilities. For community establishments to most prosper, parks must strive to look their best in order that they function as attractive hubs for vibrant activity.

Undervaluing our natural resources as an important factor in sustaining a healthy economic climate, extends to the State's defunding of forestry programs. Not a single forester remains to manage 66,000 State Forest acres. Forestry's three durational employees will be laid off in April resulting in a \$2million projected general fund revenue loss in the next 10 years. Full time DEEP foresters typically generate an average \$90,000 annually to the General Fund by growing and harvesting forest products. These workers earn more than they cost and help provide the expertise critically needed in communities striving to provide safe attractive environments for their citizens.

Superb recreational opportunities in our forests and parks really distinguish our State. A small but dedicated staff, a large network of

supporting volunteer Friends, and ordinary citizens over multiple generations have worked so steadfastly to keep the Park and Forest System alive and thriving . It truly deserves your support as well.

As we begin celebration of the State Parks Centennial year, in-state and out-of state eyes will be upon us. We need sufficient staff to welcome and service visitors. Please do all that you can to make this Centennial year and all those that follow a source of pride to our citizens. Safeguard these precious resources for the good of us all.

Respectfully submitted,

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